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What Can Love Do?

By The Rev. Susan D. Parsons

In 3rd century Rome, Emperor Claudius II decided the best way to recruit more men into his army was by making marriage illegal. He had discovered men weren't nearly as keen to go tromping off to war in foreign lands for extended periods of time if they were married or engaged. His pronouncement applied not only to the men already in his army, but to all men of Rome, as well.

Lovers at that time were no less determined than we are to find a priest to marry them, and they soon found Father Valentinus. Here was a priest with a great love for God's people who was willing to defy the emperor and marry people who were in love. We know this priest as St. Valentine.

Not surprisingly, Valentine was jailed for his willingness to do weddings, but still his love for others was undeterred. He befriended his guards and even baptized them.

One of the guards was so comfortable with the prisoner that he asked Valentine to teach his daughter who was blind, by reading to her. Valentine happily did this. Even Emperor Claudius softened a bit, eventually offering to pardon Valentine if he would renounce Christianity and worship the gods of Rome. Of course, our hero declined, suggesting instead the emperor become a Christian. The outraged Claudius sentenced Valentine to death.

Just before his execution, Valentine wrote a note to the young girl he had been tutoring, encouraging her to continue to love others as Jesus had loved. He signed the note "From Your Valentine."

Valentine was martyred on February 14, 270 A.D. In honor of Valentinus, couples began honoring him by writing notes to their beloved on this day, though it seems to me they might have chosen the day he was born or the day he wrote the note, rather than the day he was beaten to death and beheaded.

Over time, miracles were attributed to him, and more than two hundred years later Pope Gelasius declared February 14th would be celebrated as St. Valentine's Day.

Now, details of this story may be unclear or even embellished – and there were most certainly at least two or three Fr. Valentinus' and all of them were martyred. But the feast of St. Valentine has nevertheless been celebrated as a day when lovers give their beloved small gifts of flowers and candy since at least the 5th century. Christianity embraced the opportunity to celebrate love and lovers.

Though the celebration is just behind us for this year, and we tend to associate this feast day with romantic love, we followers of Jesus know our love is meant to be for all people. This is not nearly as much fun as romance. Still, we know love isn't primarily a feeling, it's something we do, which is a good thing because feelings are ephemeral – they come and they go, they change, they go away. We can certainly feel the love we have for someone, but the feeling isn't the love.

When Jesus commands us to love, he's not demanding we have a feeling – thank God – he's using love as a verb. To love means to work to discover and bring out God in another person. When we say, "I love you," we are

saying we will look for God in someone, no matter how appallingly unattractive they may sometimes be.

Our love will allow someone to find God in themselves. Maybe we need to find God in ourselves, too.

To love the way Jesus calls us to love is complicated and often difficult. To love this way, takes us closer to God; takes us to the very heart of who God is; takes us to a place where valentines and candy and flowers are lovely, but can't hold a scented candle to the glorious love of God.

As the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. charged us to remember:

“When I speak of love, I am not speaking of some weak and sentimental response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Moslem- Christian-Jewish- Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of St. John: ‘Let us love another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God’ (1 John 4:7).” Speech delivered at a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned, April 4, 1967, Riverside Church, New York City.